



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Educational Needs of Muslim India”

Inaugural Speech at the All India Muhammadan Educational Conference

Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan

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Delhi, India

Nine years ago you did me a great honour by electing me to be the President of the M.A.O. Educational Conference held in the Imperial City of Delhi on the historic occasion of the Proclamation Durbar of His late Majesty the King Emperor Edward the VII as the first English Emperor of India, and since then many important transactions have taken place in the history of the country, but there is none of greater dignity than the present visit of Their Imperial Majesties King-Emperor George V and Queen-Empress Mary, to announce in person their Coronation to their Indian subjects. This visit coincides with the date of the inaugural meeting of the Moslem Educational Conference and, therefore, we open our present Sessions to-day under the most auspicious and favourable circumstances. I appreciate the great honour you have done me by electing me to be your spokesman once more, and I will begin my remarks by humbly tendering our most heartfelt and most reverential homage to Their Imperial Majesties the King-Emperor and Queen-Empress on their arrival in this country. We still remember with deep gratitude the inspiring and memorable visit of Their Majesties to Aligarh in March 1906. The most auspicious visit will, I am sure, tend to unite all the races and different creeds into one great Indian Nation.

From this solemn subject of the King Emperor's presence in the country I turn to that of the University whose cause we all have at heart. When the King Emperor, on his accession, replied to the deputation from the University of Oxford he said it was his desire to follow the example of his illustrious father, and of Queen Victoria, “in sustaining and fortifying those acts of learning on whom prosperity, the character and repute of our civilisation largely depend.” In that pregnant phrase we see indicated something of the true nature of a University. It is an institution that is meant to teach far more than the knowledge imparted in the lecture-room; if not, it fails in a great essential. The character and prosperity of a people do not depend upon mere book-learning. They require deeper foundations. So it must be our aim in founding our University, not to produce at a great cost merely an institution where the wisdom of the East and the science of the West may be acquired and degrees conferred upon the meritorious, but to found an institution that will play the same part in the life of the Mahomedans of India, as do the great Universities in Europe in the life of the Europeans. But one must remember that to copy any model must mean an ultimate failure; for an institution must be in keeping with the traditions and historic circumstances of the people it desires to serve. We must try and embrace all the best features of the principal Universities of the world, and while accepting the noble traditions of the Institutions of America and Europe, we should

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ever remember that our first duty is to keep alive the true spirit of Islam. We must ever keep in mind the example of those who have gone before us. The true essence of Islam is its noble teachings, its purity of thought and deed, its ennobling influence and its spirituality which has been misunderstood and ill-used in the last few generations. Let it be for us to make good the wrong, and to show that we at least are not ignorant of the true nature of our beloved faith. It is for us the living to take an inspiration from the past, and to revive the intellectual and moral forces of Islam.

I am glad to see that the great University movement has emerged from the region of doubt and difficulty, and that the initial stage of our great undertaking has been entered upon. But I must plainly say that tremendous, almost super-human sacrifices and efforts must be made by us if we wish to make it a complete and an unqualified success. No great task has ever succeeded without great sacrifices on the part of its promoters. Our deserts will be in proportion to our sacrifices. I am glad to see that we have among us men who realise this fact, and I cordially congratulate you all on the initial success of your undertaking so ably and so tactfully engineered by my esteemed friend the Raja Saheb of Mahmudabad. I beg of you to remember and realise the fact that we must, in the first place, deal with the immediate and practical aspects of the question. If we fail to make the best use of the advantageous circumstances in which we now find ourselves, our efforts will come to naught. That will be a bitter disappointment to all the lovers of Islam. In the first instance, we are confronted with the financial question, and I beg of Princes and peasants, and all the well-wishers of Islam, who have most generously promised to contribute to the funds of the University, to be so good as to send in their subscriptions at once. There is no time to lose. Our position and our hopes are trembling in the balance. They depend upon our finances and the sacrifice we make, but I hope the whole of Islam will rise to the great occasion and rally round and help this great cause without any delay. The minimum sum required must be found immediately. I have faith in my co-religionists and I am sure they will not fail to make the best use of the splendid opportunities that are now within their grasp.

It was with great admiration that I learnt of the work carried on by my friend the Raja Saheb of Mahmudabad and the Constitution Committee [on the proposed Muslim University of Aligarh]. I need hardly say that I find myself in hearty agreement with the principle and details connected with the arrangement of the Constitution. I must also fearlessly assert that according to my humble opinion, we must not be unnecessarily too jealous of giving a little more power of supervision to the Chancellor, for one thing that I am quite certain of is that the influence of the head of the Government of India will certainly be exercised for improvement in the standard of education, and that is perhaps the greatest need of the University. These are the immediate questions before us. I earnestly beg of you not to let this rare occasion slip from our hands, but to make a firm, united and whole-hearted effort to complete this great national work. The immediate and necessary question is the launching of the University into existence, but there are great and vitally important questions which cluster round our central movement, and they deserve our careful attention. To make our system of education successful, and to be attended with satisfactory and far-reaching effects, we must



rest it on a solid base so that our superstructure may not give way under the stress of higher learning.

I have more than once expressed my opinion that in addition to the University, we must establish first class Provincial colleges to be affiliated to the great University and prepare men of learning, who may by and by take rank as servants and capable teachers in the University. While advocating the system of higher education, I must also draw your attention to the absolute necessity of a sound system of primary education. No solid superstructure can stand safely on softer soil. In order to raise our people to their legitimate sphere of power, influence and usefulness, we must have a serviceable and extended system of education for the benefit of the masses. It is the duty of the Government to supply primary education to the masses which is beyond the means and scope of voluntary efforts in a vast country like India. I am glad to say that the Government have expressed themselves in favour of free primary education, and are anxious to do what they can in this matter of vital importance to the ryots. I am also delighted that enlightened public opinion has so unmistakably pronounced itself in favour of compulsory universal education.

Gentlemen, believe me no country can ever flourish or make its mark as a nation, as long as the principle of compulsion is absent. The colossal ignorance of the Indian masses militates against uniting them as a nation, and the ideal of a united nation is an ideal, which we must constantly cherish and keep before us, making every endeavour towards its realisation. It is this colossal ignorance of the masses which prevents Moslems from uniting themselves in a spiritual union and of Brotherhood such as must be our essential aim and ambition. I firmly believe that primary education should be free and compulsory, and it should be so devised that its benefit may extend equally to the minorities, as to the majorities of the Indian communities. No system of primary education can be deemed satisfactory unless it is so carefully elaborated that minorities receive the same benefits as the majorities. I must cordially welcome the movement for the adoption of compulsion in primary education among the masses, and if it is to be efficacious and serve the noble purpose which it is intended to do, then it must be free from all and any taint of an invidious distinction between one category of poverty and another.

Nothing would be more fatal than forcing the parents of going through an inquisition of their income, and more particularly will this be so in the case of parents belonging to the minorities, and even when they were treated most justly they would constantly feel that they had not received the same benefits as others. This impression should not in any case be created or allowed. If there is to be a limit, then let that limit be Rs. 100 per month. I think it will be disastrous to set any limit. If you fix a limit, let it only to prevent the rich from receiving free benefits, but great care should be taken to see that it is only the real well-to-do classes who are made to pay. Knowing as I do the rural population, I am convinced that nothing short of a most reasonable and most liberal limit will satisfy them. If a liberal provision is not made in the limit of income of parents, the system would possibly be an engine of injustice and discontent. Hence the greatest possible care should be exercised in drawing a line. Again, it is equally necessary that proper safe-guards should be provided in



regard to the teaching of their own languages to the minorities, who should receive an equitable treatment in this important respect. There cannot be free education for one language and utter illiteracy for those who speak another. I beg of you to realise fully that the system of primary education, unless it is free and compulsory, and provides a safe-guard for teaching the vernacular will injure your community more than any other. Besides, such a system is doomed to be an inevitable failure. You stand to gain more by the carrying out of the principle of the Hon'ble Mr. Gokhale's Bill than any other section of the people in India, provided care is taken in the re-adjustment of the details. It is not only as a Moslem that I heartily support the movement for the free and compulsory primary education. You must also remember that we are Indian, and I support the movement just as well as an Indian as a Moslem from a deep conviction of its necessity. I have frequently emphasised the urgent need for a technical and commercial system of education, and I entertain great hopes from the University which may develop into a great centre of scientific teaching together with moral and humanitarian training. If our people take to science and scientific education in the light spirit, the industrial and economic future of our community will no longer be in doubt.

But everything depends upon the sacrifices we now make. We should take a lesson from Japan. If we make such sacrifices as Japan did during the period of its regeneration, or the same sacrifices which the Prussians made after they were once humbled to the dust, we may be certain of our regeneration. We should be prepared to give such sacrifices as have been given by civilizations, who gave enormous sacrifices of money, time, thought, and even of many of their cherished sentiments. If we are desirous of attaining our ideal, and reaching the goal of ambition, we must be prepared to give ample sacrifices for reality of the struggle for existence and national development. The late Marquis Komura, the great Japanese statesman, told me that during their period of regeneration from 1800 to 1890, every Japanese individual paid in one shape or another directly or indirectly, a third of his gross income, that is to say, more than 90 per cent. of his average income for the national work and national welfare. The result is that Japan was what it is to-day. What were the sacrifices which the companions of the Prophets made? What were the sacrifices of the fraternity from the reign of glorious Omar? We all remember with pride the brilliant period in Andelos and Baghdad. We must not forget the spirit of self-sacrifice and self-effacement which made Moslems of the first century immortal in history. We must derive our inspiration from those imperishable names, and strain every nerve to revive the faded glory of Islam. I must frankly tell you that utter and ignominious failure stares us in the face unless we make the necessary sacrifices of our wealth, our income, our time, energies and thought. Will you make it now? Upon your action, and not upon my words or your words depends the future of Islam.